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PETER HANDKE AND SERBIA**

There are three kinds of reactions to the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2019: those who condemn Peter Handke and the Academy; those who argue that Handke deserves the prize, but criticise his views on the Balkan wars; and those who unreservedly regard him as a worthy laureate.

According to the critics, not only did Handke side with the Serbs in the 1990s; he actively supported Milošević, visited him in The Hague, and spoke at his funeral. In addition, he questioned what happened in Srebrenica.

Perhaps the criticism says more about our own cultural climate than about the author himself, and we may assume that few have read what Handke has actually written on the matter. Instead, opinions are often based on loose quotes and second- or third-hand information.

Handke deals with the conflicts in former Yugoslavia in an account of a trip to Serbia in the late autumn of 1995, in a follow-up in the summer of 1996, including a

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visit to eastern Bosnia, as well as in his book on Serbia during the bombings in 1999. There is also an essay on the Tribunal in The Hague, 2003, and another on a meeting with Milošević, 2006, and finally a text from 2011 on the former television director Dragoljub Milanović who received ten years in prison for the death of 16 co-workers killed by NATO bombs. None of these works have been translated into Swedish (and only one into English).

The first text, entitled *A Winter Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morava, and Drina – or Justice for Serbia*, was published in January 1996, after the Dayton Accords, when the wars in the Balkans appeared to have ended. Thus, Handke did not participate in the debate on Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, and no one could, at the time, have been “shocked by his positions during the Balkan war”.

The travel diary from 1996 displays qualities regarded typical of Handke’s writing: the slow rhythm, subtle descriptions of events, places and moods; reflections on the author’s stance and the role of language; all taken into consideration by the Nobel committee. Milošević is mentioned once, when Handke quotes a *Spiegel*-article on Dayton; but he does not express any sympathy with Serbian nationalism, nor does he question the massacre in Srebrenica. However, he believes that the Serbs are not solely responsible for the war and he is disturbed by linguistic manipulations. “A part of me couldn’t take sides, even less condemn.”

It is impossible to overlook Handke’s origin. In “Farewell to the Dreamer of the Ninth Country,” from 1991, as in the travel diary, he speaks of his mother, born in a Slovene-speaking village in Carinthia, of his grandfather who in 1920 voted for joining Yugoslavia, and of his own return to Slovenian culture after a childhood in Berlin. For Handke, Slovenia was part of a larger South Slav region, extending from the Alps to the Byzantine churches and Albanian mosques of Macedonia.

The break with Slovenia begins during the 1980s when guest workers from southern Yugoslavia, in the rhetoric of intellectuals, were perceived as a threat to Slovene identity and their undeveloped home republics regarded as economic exploiters. Handke distances himself from any idea of a civilised Central Europe superior to the primitive Balkans, and sees no need for a Slovene or Croatian state. He describes how most of the victims during the Slovenian “War of Liberation” in 1991 were conscripts who did not open fire, but were shot by middle-aged Slovenian home-guards.

The core of the book is a moral critique of a Germany that no longer wishes to be reminded of crimes committed during World War II. Karoline von Oppen points out, in her essay “Justice for Peter Handke”, that his journey is, in fact, a pilgrimage to the sites of death, starting with Zemun, where Jewish women and children detained in a

camp run by Ustasha were killed in a mobile gas chamber driven by Germans. The journey goes on to Kragujevac and Kraljevo, towns of massacres. In the text, Handke reflects on how German journalists called upon Serbs in Croatia to accept their status as second-class citizens, which must be related to “the never forgotten persecutions under the Hitlerite-Croatian Ustasha regime”. He responds to charges of Serb paranoia by asking “how conscious was the German (and Austrian) people of what it did and made others do, again and again” in the Balkans.

During Yugoslavia’s dissolution, Germany ignored European agreements and recognized the independence of Slovenia and Croatia before a settlement was reached. German policy was at least as questionable during the bombings in 1999, when military intelligence produced embarrassing fake news. (See Brigadier General Heinz Loquai’s book on “the war that could have been avoided”).

The texts on The Hague contain interesting observations on the court's work in a dramaturgical perspective, as well as an odd meeting where Handke listens to Milošević’s expositions for three hours, unable to interrupt him. He had been asked by the defence attorneys to testify, which he declined. However, he later agreed to attend the funeral.

It is difficult to find support in Handke’s writings for his alleged views. In addition, the parallel made to Ezra Pound is only valid if Milošević were Hitler and the war in Bosnia equivalent to the Holocaust. If so, one would have to disregard historical reality and reinterpret the Genocide Convention in a way that relativizes the murder of the European Jews. We should be able to distance ourselves from violence without using a rhetoric that becomes vacuous and immoral.

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¹ *A journey to the rivers: Justice for Serbia* is the only translation into English of Handke’s writings on Yugoslavia.

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